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An Analysis of the Coverage of the Gaming Issue in the *Navajo Times*

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On April 19th, 1997, the Navajo Nation Council authorized a referendum on what is generally referred to as "the gaming issue."¹ This referendum is to be held on November 4th, 1997, and will ask the specific question: "Do you favor the establishment of Navajo Nation regulated gaming operations on Navajo Nation to generate revenues?" When a similar proposal was put to the vote in 1994, it was defeated by the fairly comprehensive margin of 55 percent to 45 percent, against the expectations of the Navajo Nation Division for Economic Development, who had lobbied hard for its acceptance in 1994 and are again campaigning determinedly on this occasion.

The result of this vote is likely to have extensive consequences for the Navajo Nation and for the neighboring states of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. Although the establishment of Class III gaming² in an area is primarily seen as a beneficial economic development issue, there are also important social, ethical and political implications that need to be addressed. However, as Robert Goodman, the director of the United States Gambling Study has noted, "many politicians, business leaders, and newspaper editors were consistently making the same assumption: that . . . the economic results of expansion could not help but be positive."³ The Navajo electorate's rejection of the gaming proposal in 1994 may indicate that the voters were more aware of the negative impacts of the issue than their represen-

1 "Gaming" is the currently accepted euphemism for "gambling," given the latter term's connotations of disreputability and organized crime.

2 A category under the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, to be discussed below.

3 Goodman, Robert. *The Luck Business : The Devastating Consequences and Broken Promises of America's Gambling Explosion*. (New York : Free Press, 1995), pp.64-5.

tatives. Indeed, the expansion of gambling at the national level does not seem to be due to any grass roots demand; rather, it is the result of "aggressive lobbying by the gambling industry and the promotional efforts of politicians who haven't been able to find more productive alternatives for economic development."⁴

Given its vast size and its dispersed population, how are these issues raised and debated within the Navajo Nation by the electorate? Arguably, the weekly *Navajo Times* newspaper is one of the most important vehicles for agenda-setting and opinion-influencing on the Reservation. Although it is published only in English, circulation estimates suggest that it reaches all corners of the Reservation, sometimes translated orally into Navajo and read aloud to non-English readers.⁵ (Although the Navajo radio station, KTNN, has comparable penetration, unlike the *Navajo Times* the radio tends to eschew hard news and political discussion.⁶) It would therefore seem valuable to study how the *Navajo Times* has dealt with this important and controversial issue in the weeks preceding the referendum.

Background

In 1978, the Seminole Nation of Florida began to run bingo games with prizes well in excess of those countenanced by state rules. Taken to court by the state, the Seminoles were finally vindicated in federal court by a ruling arguing that, if bingo was legally sanctioned by the state, prize limits were only regulations, and states had no regulatory authority over Native American Reservations. Other tribes across the nation adopted a similar high-stakes gaming policy and, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the tribes' favor in 1987, it was clear that "there was no way to regulate reservation gaming short of an act of Congress . . . So Congress acted."⁷

The 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) has been called by some tribal leaders "one of the most important single actions the federal government has taken concerning Indians."⁸ It is the legislation on which all subsequent gaming ordinances have been based,

4 Ibid., p.180.

5 Conversation with Tom Arviso, *Navajo Times* Editor, October 1997.

6 Conversation with Tazbah McCullah, KTNN General Manager, October 1997.

7 Thompson, William N. *Native American Issues*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1996), p.53.

8 Goodman, op. cit. p.105.

and carries important implications for tribal sovereignty as well as economic development. The act defines three categories of gaming: Class I gaming, which is traditional and social gaming and is outside the scope of the act; Class II gaming, which includes bingo, ticket lotteries and certain card games, and is required by the act to be subject to a tribal gaming ordinance; and Class III gaming, which is termed high stakes or “casino-style” gaming, and requires the negotiation of a tribe-state compact. So far, 130 tribes throughout the United States have negotiated compacts with 29 states in order to operate legal Class III gaming, some with spectacular financial success. The Foxwoods casino in Connecticut, run by the Mashantuckett Pequot tribe, is not only the largest casino in the world, but also the most profitable, with annual revenues of over \$900 million—more than double the winnings of premier Las Vegas casinos.⁹ Overall, Indian gaming represents \$49 million of a national gaming industry total of \$44.4 billion: 9.4 percent of the total legal gaming in the United States.¹⁰

Figures like these help to explain the economic attraction of gaming enterprises for tribes; in general, as Thompson dryly noted: “Opportunities for economic development on Native American reservations have not been plentiful.”¹¹ Coal mining, which at present produces the bulk of Navajo revenue, is providing less than in the past, and all mineral reserves are depleting. Federal revenues are felt to be drying up. Alternative development schemes to gaming have often seemed far less enticing: using Indian land for the storage of toxic waste has been a proposition offered to at least 40 tribes across the nation, and one tribe has considered the possibilities of legalizing brothels on its reservation. Raising revenue through taxation is as unpopular on Indian land as it is in the rest of the United States. Another strong incentive is that profits from Indian gaming facilities—owned by the tribe and not by individuals or corporations—are not subject to collections by the Internal Revenue Service. However, while gaming will undoubtedly deliver economic advantages in the short term, it is an unreliable source of long-term revenue. Goodman asserted that “a new gambling venture will typically produce dramatic revenue increases when it is first introduced, but then revenues flatten as public interest wanes or as other governments legalize competing enter-

9 Figures from Thompson, *op. cit.*, p.52. The tribe recently gave \$10 million to the Smithsonian Institution toward the establishment of the Museum of the American Indian—the largest donation in the Institution’s history.

10 Figures from *Navajo Gaming: A Source of Revenue*, a promotional pamphlet issued by the Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development, 1997, p.1.

11 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p.51.

prises.”¹² Few of the existing casinos on Indian reservations are likely to retain their monopoly status for much longer, as public pressure for non-Indian gaming operations grows. In 1994, New Mexico residents approved a referendum advocating the expansion of non-Indian gaming enterprises in the state, in direct response to the opening of casinos by nine of the state's tribes. The plans of the Navajo Nation, if gaming is approved, to open casinos in Cañoncito, in Shiprock and just west of Gallup are likely to exacerbate this demand.

A further consideration is that tribes often have to borrow the money for the infrastructure required by new casinos; if revenues fall sharply after a short period of prosperity, these debts could place the tribal economy under severe strain. Microeconomic impacts can also be negative, as in the case of the Iowa and Illinois riverboats, where the local communities found that the riverboats were cannibalizing local entertainment industries, resulting in an accelerated decay of the towns that the boats were intended to save. (This effect will of course be less pronounced on Indian reservations, where competing industries are negligible.) Also, although employment opportunities are often cited as a benefit of casino gaming, the experience of many tribes has been that the non-Indian management companies appointed to run the casinos often bring in their own staff—as well as taking a generous slice of the profits.

Nevertheless, there is now a sufficient wealth of experience in Indian gaming for tribes setting out on this path to avoid the pitfalls of earlier ventures and to maximize the available profits.¹³ Even if the economic advantages are granted, then, what other factors need to be considered?

It is an IGRA requirement that gaming revenues be used for the welfare of the tribe as a whole, and many communities have used casino proceeds for such projects as schools, hospitals, scholarships, emergency services and other such worthy social causes. However, there are serious social problems associated with gaming, such as gambling addiction, family neglect and increased crime, that may in fact result in the tribe's having to spend more and more money to treat these consequences. Goodman cited studies carried out in 1995 suggesting that problem gambling rates in Indian tribes were two or three times higher than in

¹² Goodman, op. cit., p.163.

¹³ The National Indian Gaming Association publishes a monthly magazine, *Indian Gaming Today*, which covers in depth legal, economic, statistical and operational topics.

white populations.¹⁴ The unpaid debts and criminal activities associated with gambling addiction will obviously have ripple effects on the community as a whole and, although the target customers for the casinos may be outsiders, it is highly likely that many of the patrons will be locals.

Associated with the social issue is the ethical question of whether it is right, in the context of the tribe's traditional values, to use gambling as a tool of economic development in the first place. The Navajo Nation prohibits the sale of alcohol within its borders, and the moral equivalence of gaming is a reasonable argument. Although gambling has long been a part of Navajo culture (even the division of day and night is the consequence of spiritual gaming), it carries a definite pejorative connotation, especially when indulged in excessively. The ceremonial aspect of the traditional "shoe game," once used for ritual healing purposes, has been lost through the game's being used more often nowadays for competitive gaming.¹⁵ In Navajo mythology, the dark, nefarious figure of "Mr Gambler" represents, among other things, a symbol of selfishness and destructive greed. Significantly though, myth may have a negative impact on voter turnout: "I was told that you don't vote on gaming because when it was voted on in early Navajo history, nobody won," explains Navajo psychologist Wilson Aronilth.¹⁶

One more ambiguity in the gaming issue is that of sovereignty. A complex, slippery concept in any society, sovereignty refers basically to the right of a community to make its own decisions and enact and enforce its own laws. By extension, it can also refer to economic self-sufficiency and independence from federal bodies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs. While on the one hand IGRA was hailed by many tribal leaders as an assertion of the rights of Indian tribes to negotiate with states as sovereign entities, others worried that the terms of the act gave outside agencies, including federal and state bodies, unacceptable regulatory authority over reservation decisions. Sovereignty, argue those who hold this opinion, can and should be obtained and exercised without outside interference. This position is not necessarily a rejection of gambling, but is a rejection of the authority of IGRA: if tribes wish to establish a gaming industry, they should be free to do so without acceding to any federal or state stipulations.

14 Goodman, op. cit., p.111.

15 See the article "No Gambling on Navajo Myths" in the *Navajo Times*, August 14th 1997, p.1.

16 Ibid., p.1.

While there are many other issues in the debate over legalized gaming, the above four broad topics—economic consequences, social effects, ethical judgments and sovereignty—probably represent the main areas of concern to voters having to make a decision on this complex matter. These four, then, will constitute the topic areas for research in this content analysis. The main research questions are:

- 1: What is the prevailing orientation towards the gaming issue as reflected in *Navajo Times* coverage?
- 2: Which aspects of the gaming issue are of greatest concern to the discussants?
- 3: Does the gender of the writer seem to be a factor in orientation toward the issue?
- 4: Does the provenance of the article—the writer's affiliation—seem to be a factor in orientation toward the issue?

Methodology

Nine consecutive issues of the *Navajo Times*, from August 7, 1997 to October 2, 1997, were thoroughly scanned for all references to the gaming issue, whether in the form of editorials, articles, cartoons, readers' letters, public announcements, paid advocacy notices or whatever. This research yielded a total of 20 units of analysis (called, for convenience, "articles"), each of which was then coded according to the following scheme:

- Article: The case number of the reference.
- Date: The date of the issue in which the reference appeared.
- Squinch: The total area of the article in square inches.
- Gentone: The general tone of the article with reference to the gaming issue, coded as positive (1), negative (2) or balanced (3).
- Source: The authorship provenance of the article, coded as staff writer/correspondent (1), guest writer (2), official agency (3), reader's letter (4) or other (5).
- Gender: The sex of the article's author, coded as male (1), female (2) or unknown (3).
- Page: The page on which the article initiated.

- Position: The quadrant of the page in which the article initiated, coded as upper left (4), upper right (3), lower left (2) or lower right (1).
- Issue 1: The main issue dealt with by the article, coded as economics (1), ethics (2), social problems (3), sovereignty (4) or other (5).
- Tone 1: The orientation of the article with regard to Issue 1, coded as positive (1), negative (2) or balanced (3).
- Issue 2: The secondary issue (if any) dealt with by the article, coded as in Issue 1.
- Tone 2: The orientation of the article with regard to Issue 2, coded as in Tone 1.
- Import: A computed index of prominence, obtained by multiplying the square inches figure by that for position on page.

Coding reliability was tested by having an independent individual code the variables for "gentone," "issue 1," "tone 1," "issue 2" and "tone 2." The second coder was a social science graduate with long experience of content analysis. All 20 articles were read and values assigned to the above five categories, giving a total of 100 units of comparison. An agreement factor of 92 percent was obtained, which was deemed acceptable. The results were then entered into SPSS.

Given the small number of cases, Case Summaries and Frequencies were run to give a clear picture of the distribution of the data. Main and secondary issues were cross-tabulated against orientation, and gender was cross-tabulated against both the general tone of the articles and against the main and secondary issues. Similarly, the source of the article was cross-tabulated against both the general tone of the article and against the main and secondary issues. The small size of the sample precluded to a certain extent the value of statistical tests for significance, but certain trends in the data were found to be at least suggestive.

Results

- 1: What is the prevailing orientation towards the gaming issue as reflected in Navajo Times coverage?

Table 1 shows that fully 50 percent of the articles were negatively disposed toward gaming in general tone, with 30 percent positive and 20 percent balanced.

Table 1: General tone (orientation) of article.

ORIENTATION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Positive	6	30
Negative	10	50
Balanced	4	20
Totals	20	100

2: Which aspects of the gaming issue are of greatest concern to the discussants?

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the main issue in 50 percent of cases was overwhelmingly the economic one, and half of the remaining 50 percent included a discussion of the economic consequences as a secondary issue. Social problems were the main focus of 25 percent of

Table 2: Main issue discussed.

ISSUE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Ethics	1	5
Economics	10	50
Sovereignty	1	5
Social Problems	5	25
Other	3	15
TOTAL	20	100

Table 3: Secondary issue discussed.

ISSUE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Ethics	1	5
Economics	5	25
Sovereignty	2	10
Social Problems	4	20
Other	8	40
TOTAL	20	100

the articles, and the secondary issue in 20 percent.

3: Does the gender of the writer seem to be a factor in orientation toward the issue?

Cross-tabulation of general tone of article against gender of writer in Table 4 perhaps indicates a slightly more negative view on the part of female writers, although the numbers are clearly too small to draw any definite conclusions.

Table 4: Gender of writer and orientation toward issue.

GENDER OF WRITER	Positive Tone	Negative Tone	Balanced Tone	TOTAL
Male	3	5	1	9
Female	1	3	1	5
Unknown	2	2	2	6
TOTAL	6	10	4	20

Other cross-tabulationsshowed that the gender of the writer does not appear to affect either the choice of main and secondary topics or the orientation towards them.

4: Does the provenance of the article—the writer's affiliation—seem to be a factor in orientation toward the issue?

Table 5: Source of article and general tone.

SOURCE OF ARTICLE	Positive Tone	Negative Tone	Balanced Tone	TOTAL
Staff writer	1	3		4
Guest writer	1	3	1	5
Official agency	2	1	1	4
Reader's letter	2	3	1	6
Other			1	1
TOTAL	6	10	4	20

Cross-tabulation of the source of the article against orientation (Table 5) shows a fairly balanced pattern, with only the official agency articles displaying a majority of positive orientations. These also dominate the prominence index, mainly through one full back-page article and one half back-page one, paid for by the Division of Economic Development. Of the six letters from readers, three were negative, two positive and one balanced; five of the writers were male, the one female showing a negative orientation.

Discussion

In this pilot study, only a limited number of tentative conclusions may perhaps be inferred with regard to the research questions:

- 1: The climate of opinion with regard to the gaming issue, at least as represented by the *Navajo Times*, is prevailingly negative.
- 2: The single issue of most concern to Navajos is the economic one, with social consequences running second in importance.
- 3: Gender and provenance do not seem to have strong effects on the two points noted above.

The main problem with this present content analysis, however, is the small size of the sample: only 20 units of analysis. However, the quantification and tabulation of the results as descriptive data does lead to the possible identification of certain trends, and certainly suggests that a larger study would be worthwhile.

Once the result of the referendum on November 4th is known, one possible study might be to analyse a larger sample of newspapers—over a six-month period, perhaps—and compare the findings with a similar sample drawn from the period immediately preceding the 1994 referendum. This research would yield results susceptible to direct comparative analysis, in which statistical tests for significant difference would play a valuable part.

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